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ABSTRACT

The Program for Adult College Education (PACE) at the University of Missouri at Kansas City offers a Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree. PACE faculty believe in writing as a learning tool. One course in the program is "Culture of the Working Class," which uses a variety of sources to examine how working people have lived from the turn of the century to the present. The course seems to work on several levels: validating students' families' pasts, making students aware of the changing culture of working people and of the connections between various eras, and requiring them to examine their own lives and cultures in order to define today's "working class" and to realize what media create those images and definitions. As a writing intensive course, it requires journal entries that help students think about what they read and view, comparisons of various cultures, sharing views with peers, critiquing peers' development of ideas, and synthesizing multiple sources including their own and their families' lives. Because the students are working adults, the theme has even more relevance; they can all relate to it and draw upon the special insights and experience that adult students bring to the classroom. In teaching adults, it is important to relate the classroom to their lives, for a variety of reasons; thematic courses with writing assignments that require connections to their own experiences are an excellent avenue for this. (SR)

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M. Curt Browning

Opening Minds through the Liberal Arts, in a Program for Working Adults

Unlike most higher education programs specifically for adults, the Program for Adult College Education (PACE) offers a Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree, not one aimed at business or a profession. The interdisciplinary, 12-hour "blocks" of courses require students to attend class only one evening a week (for four hours) and one weekend a month. Besides these two courses that meet, each block has a modified independent study, designed and administered by the faculty teaching the two contact courses. Though faculty may occasionally touch base with this course during classtime, this course does not meet; students simply follow its syllabus and turn in the required work. Since this is generally in some written form--as opposed to objective tests and/or oral work--PACE tends to involve more than the average amount of writing assignments, in the independent studies, alone.

But that is not the only segment of a block that requires writing; PACE faculty, some of the best faculty on our campus, believe in writing as a learning tool. When UMKC instituted its Writing Intensive Courses as part of its WAC project, our program was one of the first to submit courses for approval--because we already had so much writing in them. Besides our equivalents of Composition I and II, PACE offers a wide array of writing intensive courses (WIC): "Professional Communciations," which combines oral and written compositions and is part of the Practice and Future of Administration block; an advanced composition course, part of a block on language analysis called "The Writer's Tools: Mind, Society, Language and Language Use;" a history course, "The Works of Western Man," part of the Technology and Society block; a humanities course, "The Culture of the Working Class," in the Labor/Economics block; a summer humanities course which bridges feature and creative writing, "Turning Life Into Stories;" and another summer humanities course, "The World of Advertising," which uses novels and the functions of a mock-up ad agency to analyze the language and composition of advertisements. This adds up to six approved, upper division writing intensive courses and two lower division composition courses--plus the many other courses in the program which require a great deal of writing, in sociology, philosophy, bio-ethics, literature, economics, biology, and various interdisciplinary courses.

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To qualify as WIC, a designation conferred by a faculty committee within the College of Arts and Sciences, a course syllabus must show not just a sufficient number of pages of writing (though that can be one criterion), but must show a range of writing assignments

and research, critiquing of drafts (by instructor and/or peers), and both graded and ungraded writing. For one thing, the committee likes to see an annotated bibliography, as an indication of scholarly research; they also like journals or other types of frequent commentary to indicate critical reading and thinking--which may be non-graded. More than that, they want to see synthesis from sources and, especially, critical analysis of working drafts, followed by guided revision.

One of the courses I teach (and created) is the "Culture of the Working Class," part of a block of studies in working class issues, including history of the Labor movement and economic issues pertinent to Labor and to working people. I use a variety of sources to examine how working people have lived from the turn of the century to the present: novels, films, short stories, plays, poetry, work songs, popular songs, and even comic strips and some art. Though the time-setting is important, especially as a link to their Labor history course, we concentrate more on consistent themes which emerge: the culture shock of immigrants in a strange country, living conditions, working conditions, community conditions and services (or lack of), education and working people's attitudes towards it, religion's contribution--and as sub-themes of all of these categories: women's lives, men's lives, ethnicity, children's lives, and urban vs. country life.

Before and as they work on a selection (be it movie, novel or short story), I suggest some of the themes they should watch for; I asssign journal entries about selected themes (their choice) or give them a quote or a paragraph from the selection for them to react to. Soon, each student's journal entries take on a pattern--entries about women's work lives, for example, or religious and educational values. If we're talking about a story set in a previous era, I ask them to consider what effect the era itself had on the events or whether the same things could happen today. If we're discussing a selection set in the present, I always ask them to write about it in terms of their own experiences--to relate it to their own lives.

This connection to their own lives makes this course different from most writing courses in the regular curriculum; most PACE courses try to draw on the special experiences these older students bring to class. At the beginning of the Culture course, when students are reading their first novel and there is little to discuss from it, we talk about the meaning of "working class." Interestingly, although these students will generally say they come from a working-class background, they often do not consider themselves working class. I feel it is important to get them to think along such lines, to bring their

own impressions and home cultures into the classroom, in order to validate their pasts as they move on to their future--a future, perhaps, as members of a different "class" than they consider their families to be. This can be traumatic for some, and often causes family rifts. Part of their early journal writing, then, is to record their reactions to the discussions they have had in small groups--on what makes up the profile of working-class people and from what sources we get such impressions.

Students have written fascinating essays that draw from several films or literature selections but also tie in their family history. One black woman writing about working-class children's lives during the Depression said that her family ran a small, rural grocery in northern Arkansas during that era. She did not realize they were poor--that everyone in that racially mixed group of farmers was poor. Only because she was prompted by the writing assignment did she think to question her parents about that part of their lives, and discovered that her "folks," though black, had "carried most of their white neighbors" during those terrible years, not pressing them to pay their grocery bills; they were all in it together, she marvelled.

A young father brought in his grandfather's mining "gear," items the family had saved, (while the class was reading Jack Conroy's THE DISINHERITED, a proletarian novel set in a Missouri mining town). As Missourians they relate to this story, even if they have no experience with mining. The student had asked his own father what he remembered about childhood in a mining town and about the miner-grandfather. Hearing personal accounts of going into the mines at 14, of working in a foot of filthy water, of seldom seeing daylight due to the long hours underground, had impressed the student with the reality expressed in the novel.

Connecting their reading/viewing assignments to their families' lives makes the literature more real and helps them to see the connections between life and literature; it also validates their pasts. To create a clearer relationship between their own, present lives and the working cultures of the past that we have been discussing, I ask them to ascertain the sources from which they get their current images of what it means to be working class. The only assignment I make in this final section is a list of current films, from which they must view at east two; the rest is up to them, though I do encourage group sharing.

They readily see that whatever makes up a working class person today, it is very different from the culture of the immigrants in THE JUNGLE or even from the Missourians in THE DISINHERITED. That does not mean, however, that we no longer have a working class; it does not even mean that some of them do not belong to today's working class. It only means that the image today differs from the images they see from the 1900-1940's literature. They wrestle with their definitions and the conflicting images; most of them quickly see that their current images come from television programs and advertisements (those awful beer ads!), from movies, and from experience--but seldom from reading, as they might have in previous decades when novels were serialized in popular magazines. They write a final paper on this topic, drawing less from films and literature and more from their analysis of the world they live in. These essays are very perceptive--often funny--and personal without being diary-like.

The course seems to work on several levels in terms of working class culture: validating their families' pasts, making students aware of the changing culture of working people and of the connections between various eras, and requiring them to examine their own lives and cultures in order to define today's "working class" and to realize what media create those images and definitions. Finally, as a writing intensive course, it requires journal entries that help students think abut what they read and view, comparisons of various cultures, sharing views with peers, critiquing peers' development of ideas, and synthesizing multiple sources including their own and their families' lives. Students often say they had never read poetry before, but that reading it in the context of working class culture made it interesting; the controlling theme seems to give purpose and form to the literature and films. Because these are working adults, this theme has even more relevance; they can all relate to it and draw upon the special insights and experiences that adult students bring to the classroom. They see rather quickly, too that the writing helps them think more clearly and that their lives have meaning they might not otherwise have seen. By interviewing family members, many students opened dialogues that have lasted, and students are amazed that they had never talked about such matters with family before. In teaching adults, it is very important to relate the classroom to their lives, for a variety of reasons; thematic courses with writing assignments that require connections to their own experiences are an excellent avenue for this.